

[Book review] "*In search of middle Indonesia: Middle classes in provincial towns*". *Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Landen Volkenkunde*, v. 292; *Power and Place in Southeast Asia*, v. 4. Edited by Gerry van Klinken, Ward Berenschot

On the front cover of *In Search of Middle Indonesia* is a remarkable photograph. A man is seated upon a motorbike the colour of a green tree frog, which is parked by the side of the road. One leg is folded, his heel is in his crotch. He is pot-bellied, balding and shirtless, but his skin is taut. He is holding a cigarette in one limp hand.

The image encapsulates a number of stereotypical Indonesian masculine gestures: the cigarette, the cocked leg, the shirtlessness, but for one feature. A woman is standing by the bike, gently leaning into the man. She is also middle-aged, and looks freshly bathed. With one hand, she pinches the man's upper arm. The man recoils slightly, but they are looking into each other's eyes and laughing unreservedly. It is this open, contented, equal, and self-confident exchange of looks that serves as the image's focal point, and hints at some of the findings about provincial middle-class life trajectories, political affiliations, and economic interests presented in this volume.

*In Search of Middle Indonesia* is the fruit of a large Dutch research project involving seventeen researchers, which commenced in 2007. Research proceeded in five sites: Pekalongan in Central Java, Cilegon in West Java, Ternate in North Maluku, Kupang in West Timor, and Pontianak in West Kalimantan. In selecting the sites, the research leaders had sought a balance of market-driven and state-driven economies.

Van Klinken's introduction roots the collection deeply in studies of twenty-first-century Indonesian democracy, with occasional nods to studies of provincial towns in other countries. The study is deemed significant in light of most Indonesianist scholars' focus on the national capital, the national bourgeoisie, and elite politics in mediating democracy. As a result, the important role of provincial actors has been overlooked, and the ways in which democracy is brokered and practiced in the provinces by ordinary middle-class people—teachers, small scale entrepreneurs, civil servants—is not very well understood. *In Search of Middle Indonesia* aims to enlighten readers as to the role of these ordinary, middle-class folk in determining how democracy is lived and how it works.

According to van Klinken, provincial middle classes do not just mediate democracy, they also aggressively shape it. This group, he argues, was an important force pushing for decentralization following the fall of Suharto. Decentralization has brought the state closer to these groups of people, and enhanced their capacity to broker a democracy that rests on new kinds of patron-client relations. Interestingly, from the point of view of the Indonesian provincial middle, in both state-oriented and market-oriented towns, the role of the state in people's lives has by no means declined with the end of authoritarianism. Van Klinken explains that "the mutually constitutive role of the state and the middle classes is one of the most important emphases in the present set of studies" (24).

The chapters are organized into triplets under the themes class, the state, and everyday culture. *In Search of Middle Indonesia* is a collection of seven deep ethnographic studies of life in provincial towns, one orienting chapter by Ben White that locates the project in a broader, global scholarly lineage of studying class in provincial towns and rural areas, and an autobiographical piece by Cornelis Lay about growing up in Kupang.

My main critique pertains to the Indonesia-centrism of the volume as a whole. Most of the chapters contain solid ethnographic data and well-composed interpretations that provide a valuable and localized view of Indonesian democracy in the twenty-first century. However, more could have been done in the introduction to draw out the broader significance of these excellent case studies to the disciplines they touch on, such as human geography and political science. Barbara Harriss White's studies of towns in India are mentioned as inspirational sources, but the content of her studies, and how Middle Indonesia extends her insights, is glossed over.

Ben White's chapter, which falls immediately after the introduction, does much to draw the book out of an exclusive area studies focus. He links *In Search of Middle Indonesia* to a lineage of scholarship dating back to Lenin's and Alexander Chayanov's studies of pre-Bolshevik local government in the 1920s, and the studies of Middle America in the 1930s and 1940s by William Warner and Paul Lunt and Helen and Paul Lynd to situate the project's focus on intermediate towns and classes in broader social science scholarship. White's chapter is an entertaining read, and may have made better sense as a foreword.

Most of the ethnographies contained here, though, are drawn from lengthy studies and observation, and make for fascinating reading. Together, they provide a granular view of provincial life, democratic practice and class politics from a variety of angles.

Nicolaas Warouw's chapter is delightful. In it, he recounts instances of lower-class people in Cilegon and Pekalongan agitating to gain access to state resources. His piece depicts local elections as a safety valve for the venting and resolution of class-based frustrations and conflicts. Sylvia Tidey's contribution on civil servants and ethnicity in Kupang vividly evokes how life in Kupang very much revolves around people's jobs in the civil service. Joseph Errington's chapter on the identity negotiations involved in sustaining the Kupang version of Bahasa Indonesia provides a view of class and provincial identity through the prism of language use. Wenty Marina Minza spent a year in Pontianak in order to understand the life choices and trajectories of young people in that town. Amalinda Savirani chronicles developments in Pekalongan's construction industry, and Noorhaidi Hasan's chapter provides a gritty account of Islamic fashion and its role in democracy at the provincial level. Many of the chapters, then, are written by Indonesian scholars, and herein lies the value of this collection: it provides a view of contemporary society and democracy as it is seen by Indonesian people. Not many people will read this whole collection front to back, but those who do will be treated to the feeling that they are on an island-hopping adventure, where life and politics do not always revolve around what is happening in Jakarta.

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